

# The Workplace Walk

*(The Gemba Walk)*



**Your role as middle manager** in Lean Continuous Improvement is a pivotal one. It can't work without you.

Like many pivot points, you hold the key to success or failure. What many middle managers don't realize is that without their intentional, coordinated support, most Lean continuous improvement implementations languish in confusion and inconsistency.

You can bring order to the chaos with a simple Lean tool called the Workplace Walk.

The Workplace Walk is an in-person visit to the people involved in the improvement work of the agency. Much like a surgeon making the rounds to check on her patients in a hospital, you check on the progress of the improvement activities within your area.

Never conducted in a conference room, the Workplace Walk is a crucial element of a Lean, continuous improvement management system. It brings you into direct contact with the workers, where the work gets done, and where the improvement experiments are conducted.

These short, loosely-scripted interactions are conducted in a friendly, supportive manner. Doing Workplace Walks at regular intervals allows you to reinforce productive behaviors that are associated with successful implementations of continuous improvement. These behaviors include the following:

- Confirm standards are followed
- Reinforce accountability
- Deepen everyone's understanding of his or her work processes as well as defects and root causes

- Demonstrate manager commitment, engagement and capability
- Help others see the connection between their work and the big picture
- Drive opportunities for improvement and innovation
- Support the daily accountability system

The benefits of the Workplace Walk go even further. As you visit your employees, you are positioned to find hidden gems of talent. You are positioned to empower them to uncover the power of public service.

What will it feel like as you begin your Workplace Walk practice? It's not uncommon for managers to initially feel uncomfortable. You may at first be inclined

*"Common sense is the knack of seeing things as they are, and doing things as they ought to be done."*

Josh Billings

to give the team the answer to their obstacle rather than coach them to seek their own solutions. The purpose is not to solve a team's problem; it is to teach a team how to solve their own problems by conducting process experiments.

When you get the hang of it, you will be excited to revisit teams and find out how they are progressing. You will find yourself learning from the teams and being awed by their creative solutions.

How will you know it's working? The teams will close process gaps and maintain a new performance level. The teams will become proficient and comfortable in using data to characterize their processes; they will focus their thinking on discovering the real problem, instead of jumping to a solution; they will persist in finding the root cause through data. Teams will feel more connected to the organization's challenges and will be more engaged with finding solutions.

Plan	Do	Check	Adjust
<p>1. Determine frequency, targets, and themes for your Workplace Walks</p> <p>2. Contact area leader(s) or action plan owners to let them know about your Workplace Walk plans.</p> <p>3. Review past performance metrics and notes from past visits.</p> <p>4. Review action plans.</p> <p>5. Develop focused questions.</p> <p>Here are some suggestions for questions to consider:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What is the key problem/ process?</li> <li>2. How big is the gap between current and goal performance?</li> <li>3. How does this impact our customers?</li> <li>4. What are the major causes of this problem?</li> <li>5. What is your proposed explanation for the cause?</li> <li>6. What is your plan for eliminating these causes?</li> <li>7. What progress have you made? How do you know?</li> <li>8. Which value stream does this process flow through?</li> <li>9. What barriers/obstacles exist to implementing improvement?</li> <li>10. What's been the impact of this work on how your team functions? Your sense of engagement?</li> </ol>	<p>Go on a Workplace Walk:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Put the team at ease: Review the purpose, process, and payoff for the visit.</li> <li>2. Review performance metrics and targets (visual system): Ask questions &amp; listen.</li> <li>3. Observe (or walk) the process: Ask questions &amp; listen.</li> <li>4. Offer coaching to improve team's thinking: Ask open-ended questions to inspire analysis, generate solutions and foster decision-making.</li> </ol> <p>Provide suggestions for further exploration.</p> <p>5. Demonstrate Respect for People: Reinforce connection/contributions to the strategic plan. Applaud and appreciate the team's contributions. Describe what you'll be looking for at the next visit. Ask what the team needs from you to move forward. Ask the team to give you feedback on your visit.</p>	<p>Reflections and conclusions: What's working well for this team?</p> <p>How can this team improve:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• productivity</li> <li>• methods</li> <li>• results</li> <li>• thinking</li> <li>• commitment</li> <li>• teamwork</li> </ul> <p>If you notice a lack of progress, what are possible root causes? Do they:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• understand why they need to practice continuous improvement?</li> <li>• have sufficient technical skills?</li> <li>• understand the job?</li> <li>• have different priorities?</li> <li>• know how to work as a team?</li> <li>• face obstacles outside their scope of control?</li> <li>• lack commitment, engagement, or confidence?</li> </ul> <p>Also consider the management systems:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do the policies make sense?</li> <li>• Are goals and expectations clear?</li> <li>• Are the leadership behaviors productive?</li> <li>• Is the culture conducive to continuous improvement?</li> </ul> <p>What countermeasures can be taken to improve progress? What should I do to help?</p>	<p>Upon completion of the Workplace Walk:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Summarize your reflections in brief notes.</li> <li>2. Send your notes to the team.</li> <li>3. Retain your notes for the next Workplace Walk.</li> <li>4. Post completion metrics.</li> <li>5. Share your learning with others.</li> <li>6. Take necessary action, if applicable.</li> </ol>

### Tips

- Use open-ended questioning.
- Use active listening.
- Coach and teach, don't tell.

Your Workplace Walk communicates, through your actions, your commitment to practicing the lean principles:

- Leader as teacher
- Respect for people



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